THE REFORMING IMPULSE
October 26, 2008
Reformation Sunday

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
Psalm 107:1–9
1 Thessalonians 1:1–8
Matthew 23:1–12

"All who exalt themselves will be humbled,
and all who humble themselves will be exalted."
Matthew 23:12 (NRSV)

Thou hast the true and perfect gentleness;
no harshness hast thou and no bitterness.
O grant to us the grace we find in thee,
that we may dwell in perfect unity.

Our faith is in no other save in thee;
our faith is built upon thy promise free.
Lord, give us peace, and make us calm and sure,
that in thy strength we evermore endure.

John Calvin
"I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art"
French Psalter, Strassburg, 1545

In a recent issue of the *Christian Century*, Martin Marty argued that the essential plot of the Bible, from the first sentence to the last, is the generosity of God. There are plenty of zigs and zags along the way, detours into God's anger and wrath and judgment, but the main theme, to which the Bible always returns, is the generosity of God, the kindness and compassion and grace.

Furthermore, the Bible proposes that the generosity of God is the model for how to live a full and faithful life. Contrary to our instinct to save, hoard, secure our future by accumulating, the Bible makes the startling proposal that none of that will ultimately save us or even make us very happy. What will save our soul and our life is the generosity of God and our joyful and faithful response—our own generosity.

Today is Commitment Sunday at Fourth Presbyterian Church, the day when we ask each other to make our financial pledges to support the work of the church in the year ahead.

If you read your mail and attend worship, you understand the financial realities. This church is supported financially by 33 percent of its members. It's been true for decades, and we are hoping and praying and trying to make a breakthrough: to encourage every person whose life is touched by this church, every person whose personal hopes and values and faith are expressed through the worship and ministry and mission of this church, to step up and contribute, to make a financial pledge and keep it. Fourth Church leaders are optimistic—but realistic. Our investments are down; year-end giving may not be as generous as it has been in the past. Some of our members and contributors find themselves in a very different situation this fall and are waiting to see what happens in weeks ahead before making a commitment.

Our outreach programs are more critical than ever. We have already seen a sharp increase in the numbers of people turning to our Social Service Center for assistance, our community meals for food, our Counseling Center for encouragement. And, as never before, this weekly worship service is a deeply meaningful time of community, of standing together on common ground, on leaning on one another for support and encouragement. Times of uncertainty and stress cause each of us to ask what is really important, who—when the chips are down—we aspire to be. My hope and prayer is that, as you do this, you will think about Fourth Presbyterian Church and what it means to you, to our children, to our community, and to the world.

Today is also Reformation Sunday. Four hundred and ninety-one years ago, on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk and theology professor, nailed ninety-nine theses to the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg, Germany. Luther simply wanted to debate his ideas for the reformation of the church. The result, of course, was the enormously important historical event and era we know as the Protestant Reformation. In the past, Reformation Sunday has been an occasion for Protestants to feel good about not being Catholic, an occasion for the preacher to rant and rave and point out everything that is wrong about Rome and beat the drum for everything that is right and wonderful about being a Lutheran or Methodist or Presbyterian. In our sorry past, there were plenty of times when Catholics and Protestants fought bitterly, literally went to war with one another, over the years eyed each other suspiciously, and weren't at all sure that the other side deserved to be called Christian. We are in a different time and place today, thanks be to God: a time of collaboration and cooperation, of friendship and making common cause; a time when, increasingly, Roman Catholics feel at home here and Presbyterians feel at home there. It is a time characterized by a prominent Catholic theologian's

observation that “Roman Catholics can understand the necessity for a Reformation, and Protestants can understand the tragedy of the Reformation.”

In the Gospel lesson today, Jesus is engaged in a scathing critique of religion and religious institutions, traditions, and leaders in his day. The scribes and Pharisees, religious leaders, have made a burden and a show of their religion. They pile law upon law, rule upon rule, until the practice of religion becomes a somber duty, a heavy burden, instead of the joyful celebration of God’s generosity and grace. Worse yet, religion has become the occasion for pride, elitism, and self-aggrandizement. These fellows love the prestige and privilege and prerogatives of their position. Is there a more devastating criticism than Jesus’ “They do all their deeds to be seen by others?”

Jesus said. “All who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

There has been from the very beginning, thankfully, a reforming impulse within Christianity. Beginning with Jesus himself, it has to do with humility and service instead of authority and power. It has to do with love and generosity instead of prestige and privilege. There is a sense in which the story of the church is the story of this reforming impulse emerging time and time again to call the church back to its best and original self.

It all began so very modestly: the disciples of Jesus, after his death and resurrection, took the news of what had happened into the cities of the ancient world. They told the story of Jesus, and soon there were clusters of believers in all those cities. They began to call themselves Christians, taking his title, Christ, for themselves. As they grew and prospered, the tiny communities became a movement. Imperial Rome noticed and did not like what it saw: a growing movement of people committed to its leader about whom it used titles ordinarily reserved for the emperor—“Lord,” for instance. And so slowly at first and then gaining in ferocity, the empire began to disapprove, then discriminate, then oppress, finally to arrest and persecute Christians, executing believers for Saturday entertainment in Rome. Still the movement grew and deepened. The more determined Rome was to stamp it out, the stronger it became. And then in the year 312 an amazing thing happened. The Emperor Constantine became a Christian. The persecutions stopped. Christians came out of hiding into the light of day. No longer needing to meet in secret, the little churches could meet in public places, could build a building for their meetings. And then a second amazing thing happened. Constantine’s successor, the Emperor Theodosius, made Christianity the official religion of the empire. Everyone wanted to be a Christian. Now Roman legions marched into battle with the cross emblazoned on their shields.

The church needed an organized strategy, a way to operate in this radically new situation. It needed rules, standards, some offices with authority. And in the absence of consultants to help, it looked around at the only authority structure anybody knew about, namely the empire, and adopted it. The church, like the empire, would lodge authority at the top. The little clusters meeting in homes, hiding from persecutors, were led by elders (in Greek, *Presbyteros*.) Now, in this new situation, elders became bishops, with real authority and power. Individual churches were led by clergy. The bishop of the capital city, Rome, became the first among bishops, the father of the bishops, the pope.

When the Roman Empire began to totter and ultimately fall, the church did not. In fact the church emerged as the strongest institution in the world and began to act like a state, an empire even.

But the reforming impulse was always there. When the church became wealthy and powerful, a movement emerged from within. Faithful men and women took vows of poverty and simplicity, withdrew, and lived together in communities, called monasteries, keeping alive the memory of Jesus' humility and service. When the medieval church became too ornate and complex, Francis of Assisi traded in his fancy clothes for a plain brown cassock and started an order of brothers devoted to humility and charity and kindness, the Franciscans.

There has always been a reforming impulse within the church. In the sixteenth century, it was an Augustinian monk and priest by the name of Martin Luther. Luther wanted only to reform the church but was expelled, his writings burned, branded an outlaw with a price on his head, and became a political and religious hero to people in the Middle Ages who were impatient with the way things were in the church. The result was a new way of being church, a Protestant church.

One of Luther's admirers was a Frenchman by the name of John Calvin, a lawyer. He liked what he knew of Luther, sided with the Reformation, was exiled from France, landed in Geneva, Switzerland, stayed, started to think about another new way of being church, ended up being the leader of all the churches in Geneva, pastor at the cathedral, and for years the most powerful political figure in the city. He is our ancestor, the father of Presbyterianism, and next summer will be the 500th anniversary of his birth. Calvin was brilliant, stubborn, uncompromising, irascible, and at one time or another managed to alienate everybody in Geneva. He convinced the town council to close down the butcher shops, bakeries, and tripe sellers while he was preaching on Sunday, an interesting concept here, across the street from Bloomingdale's, Macy's, American Girl Place. He convinced the city council to turn Geneva's taverns into a kind of club,

where grace was to be said before drinking and eating, there was to be no swearing or dancing, and a French Bible was on every table. That one didn't last very long.

What John Calvin gave the world was a new notion of religious authority and, at the same time, political authority; a new way of being a church and of government. It was based not on the traditional, conventional notion that authority in church and state originates at the top, with God, who anoints the king or the head of the church, who in turn dispenses that power and authority down through layers of offices and officials, top down. Calvin's gift was the notion that God gives authority and power to the people, who have the right to exercise it on their own behalf, to elect their religious officials, pastors, and civil magistrates. He was not always consistent with his own theories. Calvin was frequently autocratic. But he gave the world the notion of religious and civil authority that would become the inspiration for political liberation movements, including the American Revolution.

He also insisted that Christian faith was worldly, focused not on itself or the internal affairs of the church but on the world, the marketplace, the economy, the educational system. Calvin taught that the church's creeds manifested themselves in the way commerce happened in the market, in the way children were treated, in the way refugees were welcomed. And so Presbyterian churches focus on the world and messy, complex, sometimes controversial worldly issues.

Calvin was a scholar, comfortable with the life of the mind. He gave us a religious tradition that is not threatened by science, for instance; a tradition that does not retreat to Biblical literalism but is open to the proposals and theories of science about time and space, about evolution—not as threats but as windows into God's amazing creation.

Calvin made terrible mistakes. He was so infuriated by the arrogance of a free thinker named Servetus, who was already condemned to death by the Catholics and Lutherans, that Calvin consented to his burning at the stake, a reminder that no religious tradition, including our own, is without embarrassing and sinful incidents. One thing new Presbyterians said is ours is the only way. Historically, we have always known that our truth is only partial and that the church is always imperfect and in need of reformation. Calvin knew he was notorious, widely famous, and wishing to be remembered for his humility arranged to be buried in an unmarked grave. Historians still don't know where it is.

We talked yesterday about the appropriateness of a Reformation celebration, including bagpipes, on a day when Dana Ferguson was so ill. We thought about changing the theme and cancelling the bagpiper, until Calum reminded me of how Dana loves this Sunday and loves walking down

the center aisle after the service wearing the Ferguson tartan stole, following the piper.

The Reformation is honored, John Calvin is honored, when the reforming impulse within Christianity is honored, when churches stop criticizing and bickering with each other and refocus their energies and resources on the world, on welcoming the refugee—the undocumented alien immigrant—and the homeless, on educating the children, on feeding the hungry and standing with the oppressed.

John Calvin gave us a way of being Christian that is not elaborate, does not pile up religious rules and rituals until they become a burden too heavy to carry, but is a way characterized by simple gratitude for the goodness of God and commitment to building God's kingdom in the world in acts of kindness and generosity, charity and justice.

It is a humble way that knows that all is grace finally, that you and I do not earn the approval of God by our own good works but by grace. God loves us as we are because it is the nature of God to love us. All we can do is say thank you and express our gratitude in lives of humble service as long as we live.

Calvin wrote a lovely hymn. It is the quintessential Presbyterian hymn:

> Thou hast the true and perfect gentleness;
> No harshness hast thou and no bitterness.
> O grant to us the grace we find in thee,
> that we may dwell in perfect unity.

And so let us be grateful for this remarkable tradition, and let us be grateful for and honor the one who said, "The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Amen.